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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BEIRUT 002407

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TAGS: [IS](#) [LE](#) [MOPS](#) [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PTER](#) [SY](#)
SUBJECT: TFLE01: BERRI SAYS CEASE-FIRE NECESSARY
EVENTUALLY, BUT FOR NOW, ISRAELI STRIKES ARE "LIKE HONEY."

REF: AMBASSADOR JEFFREY D. FELTMAN FOR REASONS 1.4

(B) AND (D)

SUMMARY

¶1. (C/NF) Lebanon's Speaker of Parliament Nabih Berri told the Ambassador today (7/17) that within another week, continued Israeli strikes will solidify Lebanese popular opinion against Israel. For now, however, he suggested in a most oblique manner that the potential for Israel's assault to weaken Hizballah militarily and undermine the organization politically is a positive development. "It's like honey. A little bit is good, but if you eat the whole jar you get sick." For the leader of a community that has by virtue of its physical location borne the brunt of the Israeli assault, Berri's spirits during the meeting were remarkably high. His condemnation of "Israeli aggression" against Lebanon was perfunctory at best. Berri insisted that Hizballah miscalculated Israel's response to its kidnapping operation last week. He added that now a cease-fire must be conducted in a way to restore the Lebanese government's sovereignty over its territory, and ensure that Hizballah does not use the cease-fire to entrench its positions and rebuild. In another positive development, Berri saw Prime Minister Siniora immediately before his meeting with Ambassador, and explained that he and the Prime Minister are now meeting "every day" to coordinate their efforts to resolve the current crisis. Berri dismissed a UN sponsored plan for Hizballah to turn over its two IDF hostages to the GOL, preferring instead an immediate cease-fire, followed by a hostage exchange (which we judge is a non-starter). The speaker may have been playing coy with this issue, however, as he studiously avoided suggesting any other proposals to induce Israel into accepting cease-fire. End summary.

A SHIITE - SUNNI RECONCILIATION

¶2. (C) On 7/17, the Ambassador and emboff called on Speaker of Parliament Nabih Berri at his Ain el Tineh residence. Berri was in a jovial mood when he received the Ambassador, having just finished a meeting with Lebanese Prime Minister Fouad Siniora and his chief of staff, Ambassador Mohammad Chattah. The prime minister and Ambassador Chattah seemed up-beat as well, especially given Siniora's grim disposition during previous meetings this week. After teasing the

Ambassador good-naturedly, the prime minister then departed. As the Ambassador and emboff sat down in Berri's office, Berri explained of Siniora, "He just stopped by, didn't even have an appointment. We are seeing each other every day now. We are having very good cooperation." (This, we note, is in stark contrast to a few weeks ago, when Berri -- the master of backroom politics -- complained that Siniora was not consulting with him sufficiently.)

WE NEED A CEASE-FIRE SOON...

13. (C) As the meeting's content moved towards Israeli's ongoing military strikes in Lebanon, Berri made perfunctory complaints about Israeli aggression and civilian casualties, especially in southern Lebanon, where he said the this week's destruction surpassed even that wrought by Israel in their 1982 invasion. He described several Israeli attacks as "massacres," showing emotion in describing the deaths of civilians in Tyre and Marwaheen. Overall, however, Berri seemed more focused on the need to achieve a cease-fire in the next "four to five days," and the importance of making sure Hizballah does not use the opportunity of the cease-fire to claim a political or military victory. Berri emphasized that any cease-fire should result in full GOL responsibility for security in the south, and (amazingly), "the complete implementation of UNSCR 1559." "This is what my national dialogue was about, wasn't it?" Speaker Berri asked. "We need complete implementation of 1559."

14. (C) Berri said he believed that if a cease-fire were achieved today, Hizballah would certainly claim victory and be politically and militarily emboldened by having forced an Israeli-cease fire without having turned over the two IDF

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hostages they seized last Wednesday morning. But Berri also worried that a prolonged Israeli campaign would start to make Lebanese popular opinion sympathetic to Hizballah. "The Israelis have another four or five days; after that people will turn against them."

BUT FIRST LET'S HAVE MORE HONEY

15. (C) Berri said he thought Hizballah had miscalculated Israel's response when they executed their kidnapping operation last Wednesday, but admitted that he felt betrayed by Nasrallah for misleading Lebanon with assurances of stability during the national dialogue. "We can never sit down at the table with him again. We think he lied to us." Berri then condemned the ferocity of Israel's military response, but admitted that a successful Israeli campaign against Hizballah would be an excellent way to destroy Hizballah's military aspirations and to discredit their political ambitions. He warned only that Israel would have to complete its mission quickly, before a sustained military campaign pushed Lebanon's popular sympathies into Hizballah's arms. Berri then suggested that Israel's strikes were "like honey." "I like a little bit of honey, but if you eat the whole jar you get sick!," Berri exclaimed, and then threw his head back in riotous laughter.

16. (C) Unfortunately, Berri suggested, for the overwhelming force shown by Israel in the past week, they have had only limited success in weakening Hizballah militarily. "In the past week, they have killed only three Hizballah fighters!" he claimed, citing a figure of 150 dead overall. Berri said that the IDF would have to markedly improve its targeting intelligence to make air strikes more effective. Either that, or they would have to wipe Hizballah out of the south with a ground offensive. "But they won't be able to sustain that for very long. They will have casualties, and popular opinion in Israel will turn against them."

17. (C) Berri seemed convinced, however, that for any chance

of a lasting peace, the IDF would have to be successful in its mission to neutralize Hizballah's military capabilities. He explained that over the past several years, Hizballah has continuously built up its military capabilities in the south alongside UNIFIL observers and limited LAF deployments. He said that during any new cease-fire, the LAF should fully deploy across the south, but they would need to make sure that Hizballah was completely destroyed first. Otherwise, he explained, they would rebuild right alongside LAF troops who were supposed to be in charge of security, but who in actuality, are too weak to stand up to Hizballah at their current strength.

INTERNATIONAL CEASE-FIRE INITIATIVES

18. (C) The Ambassador suggested to Berri that he should play leading role in the government's efforts to secure the conditions that could lead to a cease-fire with Israel, and asked Berri what initiatives he had in mind. After avoiding the question several times, Berri finally mentioned the proposal suggested by last night by Ambassador Veejay Nambiar's UN delegation. "That was the only thing they talked about for three hours," Berri said. Berri quickly dismissed Nambiar's suggestion for GOL to demand custody of the kidnapped Israeli soldiers from Hizballah, but never came up with any other proposals himself, only saying that there should be an immediate cease-fire with Israel based on "political agreements."

19. (C) Regarding other international initiatives, Berri was "mostly" impressed with last night's G8 summit statement, saying, "There were a few things we didn't like, but overall it was very good." Berri dismissed outright, however, the visit from EU Envoy Javier Solana and any suggestion that the EU may have offered to broker direct talks between Israel and Hizballah. "The EU had nothing," Berri said. "(Solana) just came here and talked, but they had nothing to offer."

COMMENT

110. (C) Berri, of course, is an ally of Syria and Iran.

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But, the quintessential Lebanese political survivor, he's not a fully-owned subsidiary of the two, and it would be inaccurate to see him simply as "Hizballah-lite." If Berri can be weaned away from his Hizballah tactical alliance, Hizballah would no longer be able to use Lebanon's strange confessional politics to veto any initiative not in its (or Syria's) interest. We are certain that Berri hates Hizballah as much, or even more, than the March 14 politicians; after all, Hizballah's support (with the exception of General Aoun and those who blindly follow him) is drawn from the Shia who might otherwise be with Berri. If Israel succeeds in weakening Hizballah militarily, then Berri will be more willing to weaken them politically. He certainly hinted at that possibility in speaking favorably for the first time in our presence of UNSCR 1559. But, while his honey description was unexpected given the subject matter, he drew a very fine line between "just enough" Israeli action and too much. We suspect that Nabih Berri's sense of the location of that fine line is quite far from the location where Israeli will ultimately choose to draw it. Berri, for example, seems to think that we are rapidly approaching the point where Israeli action becomes counterproductive to political goals. We doubt, based on the ongoing Israeli strikes, Israel is there yet.

FELTMAN